



Postadoption Services



It is common for adoptive families to need support and services after adoption. Postadoption services can help families with a wide range of issues. They are available for everything from learning how to explain adoption to a preschooler, to helping a child who experienced early childhood abuse, to helping with an adopted teen's search for identity. Experience with adoptive families has shown that all family members can benefit from some type of

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postadoption support. Families of children who have experienced trauma, neglect, or institutionalization may require more intensive services.

Postadoption Issues That Most Adoptive Families Encounter

Because of the lifelong impact of adoption, members of adoptive families may want or need additional support, education, and other services as their children grow. The following are some issues for which families typically seek postadoption support.

Loss and Grief

All adopted children experience loss at one or more points in their lives, and they may grieve their loss as they come to understand the role that adoption has played in their lives. They may struggle with understanding why they were placed for adoption and how that affects who they are. These feelings may change and reappear at different stages of life. Some adopted children may be confused by conflicting emotions about their birth parents—anger at having been placed for adoption or having their birth parents' rights terminated or worry about their birth parents' circumstances. All of these feelings may be acted out as hostility toward their adoptive parents.

Adoptive parents also may experience loss and grief issues of their own, often stemming from infertility issues or the stresses of the adoption experience itself. For some

adoptive parents, these issues may cause strains in their marriages.¹

Understanding Adoption

Children's understanding of adoption changes as they mature and can begin to comprehend its complex social and emotional foundations. Parents need to know how to answer children's questions at each stage of development.

Trust and Attachment

Children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or institutionalization prior to joining their adoptive families often have not known consistent love and affection and may have difficulty trusting and attaching to their new family. In fact, any child separated from birth parents has experienced a break in attachment. These children may need help to begin to make sense of their history and come to terms with what has happened in their lives.

School Problems

Children adopted from foster care often have experienced multiple placements among homes, as well as multiple moves among schools. An educational consultant or a child psychologist may be able to test for educational status and work with teachers from the child's school to ensure an appropriate education. School problems and the need for the services of an educational consultant may also be helpful for older

¹ The Federal government currently funds demonstration projects in postadoption services and marriage education in seven States (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/programs_fund/discretionary/2004.htm), as well as the Healthy Marriage Initiative (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage>); both of these efforts may help couples with the stresses associated with these losses.

children adopted through intercountry adoptions who already have some school experience in their former country.

Other school issues can arise around classroom assignments that are insensitive or inappropriate for adopted children, such as traditional “family tree” assignments or basic genetics lessons (e.g., identifying inherited family traits). Additionally, school is where many adopted children are first challenged to explain adoption to their peers, often as they themselves are just beginning to understand what it means. Some materials have been developed for adoptive parents and educators to use in the classroom and to educate teachers and other school personnel about adoption. Support groups may be especially helpful in pointing adoptive parents to appropriate materials.

Post Institutionalization Issues and Behaviors

Children who have spent more than a few months in an institutional setting may have missed out on important developmental activities due to a lack of stimulation and suboptimal nutrition. They may have difficulties with feeding, sleeping, and speech, as well as difficulties in forming healthy attachments.

Identity Formation

Teenagers who were adopted at any age may experience identity confusion as they confront the primary questions of adolescence—“Who am I? How am I different from my parents? Which of their values will I take as my own?” Young people who joined their families through adoption also must try to determine how these questions

relate to their birth parents, who may be unknown and even unknowable. These questions may be further complicated if the child’s race or birth culture differs from that of the adoptive family.

Birth Relative Contact

During the past decade or two, the professional adoption community has learned that many adopted children and adults desire or even need information about their birth family or to reconnect with birth relatives. This desire in no way reflects upon adoptive family relationships or the quality of parenting that adopted children received. Agency staff and private specialists can assist in providing information about birth relatives or in initiating contact, if desired, and mediating the relationships that may form.

Medical Concerns

Children who have been in multiple placements may not have received regular medical care. These children, as well as children adopted through intercountry adoptions, often have medical information that is inaccurate and/or incomplete. It is important for all children to have as complete and accurate a health history as possible. Assessment by an adoption-competent physician will provide a plan to update a child’s health and immunization status.

Racial Issues

Adults who parent children of different races or cultures need skills to prepare their children to function successfully in a race-conscious society. A survey of adults who had been adopted from Korea as infants or children found that racial discrimination was one of the most profound issues they

faced.² Parents who do not have personal experience as a target of racial prejudice must learn how to prepare their children as much as possible. (Information Gateway provides a factsheet on this topic, *Transracial and Transcultural Adoption*, available at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_trans.cfm.)

PARENTING THE ADOPTED CHILD

Child Welfare Information Gateway (Information Gateway) has a wealth of material on parenting the adopted child. To link to these resources, visit the following Information Gateway webpage: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption.

Milestones That May Trigger a Need for Postadoption Support

Children understand, think, and feel differently about their adoption at different developmental stages. For most adopted children most of the time, thinking about adoption and its complexities does not occupy a large amount of time and focus. They are busy with schoolwork and sports activities, religious functions, social events,

family gatherings, and squabbling with their siblings.

But there are times and events that predictably trigger adoption issues. Parents should watch for signs, such as changes in mood or eating and sleeping habits, indicating that their adopted child may need special support during these times. Children can be prepared by discussing the possibility that these triggers will cause a reaction, which a child likely cannot control. Parents should let their children know that they understand what is happening and will be there to help and find other resources as needed.

Common adoption issue triggers:

- Birthdays (of the adopted child, siblings, parents, birth parents)
- Anniversaries (of placement into foster care, an orphanage, or into the adoptive family, or the date of adoption finalization)
- Holidays (especially Mother's and Father's Days, but any holiday that involves family gatherings and sentiment, such as Christmas, Passover, or Thanksgiving)
- Entering kindergarten and first grade (which may be the first time an adopted child must explain adoption to peers; it can be the first time the child realizes that most children were not adopted into their families)
- Puberty (as children become sexually mature and able to conceive or father a baby themselves, thoughts of birth parents may arise)
- Adoptive mother's pregnancy and birth of child, or adoption of another child (may

² Freundlich, M., & Lieberthal, J. A. (2000) *A gathering of the first generation of adult Korean adoptees: Adoptees' perceptions of international adoption*. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Retrieved August 2005 from <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/proed/korfindings.html>

trigger doubts about the adopted child's place in the family)

- Adopted person's pregnancy and birth of child or fathering of a child (often a powerful trigger that may ignite interest in reconnecting with birth relatives, if only to obtain medical histories and updated information)

Types of Postadoption Services

The extraordinarily wide range of issues that can be addressed with postadoption services means that the services themselves must be diverse. Here are the most common types of postadoption services, including those that families have identified as most helpful.

Adoptive Parent Support Groups

In an adoptive parent support group, adoptive and prospective adoptive parents come together to offer and receive information and support from their peers. Parent groups offer their members and other participants a support system, friendships, educational programming, social interactions with other adoptive families, and advice from experienced adoptive parents. Parent groups exist throughout the country and vary extensively, from small playgroups for toddlers adopted through intercountry adoptions to large regional groups offering a range of programs and services to their members (who can number in the hundreds). Most parent groups are organized and administered by adoptive parent volunteers.

Parent groups may restrict their focus to families with children who share certain characteristics (such as having been adopted from a specific country or having been adopted through a public agency), or they may include all adoptive families in their programming. A number of national parent groups are organized into local chapters. Local adoption agencies and State adoption offices also may have information on newly formed groups. Parent groups can be located through Information Gateway's National Adoption Directory at www.childwelfare.gov/nad.

Programs and services commonly offered by parent groups include:

- Telephone warm lines
- Buddy families
- Respite care
- Lending library
- Workshops/conferences
- Pre-adoption support
- Social activities
- Children's support groups
- Ethnic heritage activities
- Newsletter
- Legislative advocacy
- Information and referral

Online Support Groups

Available 24 hours a day, Internet support groups now number in the thousands. Through participating in these groups, parents will likely find families who have experienced exactly what they are going

through and who will be able to provide helpful suggestions. Parents should remember, however, to use the same precautions with online support groups that are used for any Internet activity.

Psychological Therapy/Counseling

Members of adoptive families may at times want or need professional help as concerns or problems arise. Timely intervention by a professional skilled in adoption issues often can prevent concerns from becoming more serious problems. The type and duration of therapy will vary depending on the kinds of problems being addressed. Some families build a relationship with a therapist over years, “checking in” for help as needed. Others find they need a therapist’s help only occasionally.

There are many types of therapeutic interventions and many kinds of clinicians offering adoption therapy. For information about adoption therapy, the kinds of issues that it can address, and how to find the right mental health professional, see *Selecting and Working with an Adoption Therapist* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm).

Respite Care

Sometimes parents just need to get away for a while, reframe their problems, and get some rest. Respite care is a service that offers parents a temporary break from their parenting responsibilities. It is meant for families with children who require more skilled care than babysitters can provide or for parents going through a crisis of their own. Respite care can be in-home, meaning the respite worker comes to the house and stays with the children while the parents go out. With

out-of-home respite, the parents take the children to a designated site.

Respite care may be available on a regularly scheduled or crisis basis from a State post-adoption unit or local adoption agencies, or through a local adoptive parent group.

Seminars/Conferences

Many adoptive parent support groups, adoption agencies, and postadoption service organizations offer education in adoption issues through workshops and conferences that range in length from a few hours to a few days. At an adoption conference, parents can learn about the adoption topics that are most important to them, have questions answered by the experts, socialize with other adoptive family members, and have the opportunity to purchase adoption-related books and other informative materials. Topics covered at these trainings may include how to discuss adoption with children, strategies for building attachment, parenting challenging children, dealing with adoption at school, parenting children who have been adopted transracially, search and reunion issues, supporting cultural heritage in international adoption, and much more. Adoption agencies will often offer seminars on such topics as specific types of child behavior, child development, and talking to children about adoption. (Search the Information Gateway conference calendar at www.childwelfare.gov/calendar/index.cfm.)

Scholarships are sometimes available to help with the cost of attending adoption education conferences and seminars. State postadoption funding may be available for families who adopted through public agencies. Parents can check with confer-

ence organizers regarding scholarship opportunities.

Books and Magazines

There are many helpful books on adoption for children and adults. Many of the children's books explain the "whys" of adoption and describe the process by which children are adopted. Some may help as children begin to question and discuss their own adoption story. Some of the books help parents look at the unique aspects of adoptive parenting. Others are written specifically for those who have adopted children with particular needs or who are parenting children from other cultures.

There also are a number of magazines for adoptive families, available by subscription or online. Each provides parenting information and support specifically for families formed through adoption.

Camps/Recreational Opportunities/Heritage Camps

Overnight camps or retreats are a powerful way for members of adoptive families to connect not only with others like themselves, but also with their own family members. Such events, typically weeklong, often combine adoption and ethnic heritage education and support with traditional camping activities. Family camps offer activities for all members of the family.

Other camps serve children of certain ages and/or ethnicities. Often siblings of children who have been adopted internationally are also included in heritage camp and find it enlightening to be among the minority, as their siblings frequently are. Heritage camp counselors are frequently older adopted

youth, who provide critical role models for their younger counterparts. Frequently, camp attendees form powerful friendships with other adopted children, and they provide each other ongoing support all year long. In recent years, highly specialized camping experiences have become available for siblings separated by adoption to establish, reestablish, or strengthen their relationships with each other.

Finding Postadoption Services

Details about postadoption services in a particular area are available from local, State, and national information resources. Parents should call the public and private adoption agencies in their area and ask to be placed on their mailing lists for postadoption events. While some of these may be restricted to families who adopted through the agency, many postadoption services offered by agencies will be open to all adoptive families. Adoptive parent support groups also will have information about local agencies and organizations that provide postadoption services and their upcoming events.

The following is a listing of resources for information about local postadoption services.

Public and Private Adoption Agencies. Many adoption agencies have a postadoption specialist on staff, and many larger agencies have complete postadoption services departments. Agencies may offer counseling by on-staff clinicians, or they

can refer parents to adoption-competent therapists. Among the postadoption services offered by agencies are support groups for parents and children, educational workshops and events, cultural heritage events, respite care, and support with birth family relationships.

Specialized Postadoption Services Organizations. Agencies offering postadoption services exclusively are becoming more prevalent throughout the country. They typically offer the same kinds of postadoption services as do adoption agencies, but they do not place children for adoption and may not be affiliated with any specific adoption agency.

Adoptive Parent Support Groups. Parent groups offer information about local postadoption service providers and referrals to adoption-competent therapists. Educational events, respite care, and cultural events are among the many kinds of support a parent group may offer.

State and County Adoption Offices and Postadoption Specialists. Most State and county adoption offices have identified staff who are responsible for adoption and postadoption services or adoption subsidies. Larger jurisdictions may offer services themselves, but all will have information about local postadoption services and providers.

Adoptive parents can find out if their child is eligible for these services by contacting the adoption specialist for that jurisdiction. To find contact information for all of the State Adoption Specialists, search the National Adoption Directory at www.childwelfare.gov/nad.

State Postadoption Resource Centers.

Some States now provide a resource center specifically for postadoption services. Some of these resource centers serve only those families who have adopted children through domestic foster care, while other centers may have no restrictions on who is eligible to use their services. Most offer programs and all provide information about local postadoption services and providers.

Public and Private Mental Health Service Providers.

Mental health service providers will offer counseling on issues affecting adoptive families. Parents should be sure that the provider is adoption competent (has experience and is skilled in working with adoptive families) or willing to learn about the special issues and dynamics of adoptive families. (See *Selecting and Working With an Adoption Therapist*—www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm.)

Community Health Organizations. Local public health organizations provide mental health services and referrals to local clinicians. Parents should check to find out if the provider has experience with adoptive families.

Parents can find local contact information for these resources from the Information Gateway's National Adoption Directory (www.childwelfare.gov/nad).

Paying for Postadoption Services

While many postadoption services are not free of charge to adoptive families, there may be Federal and State funding to support services for families who have adopted children from a public agency. Many children adopted from public agencies qualify for adoption assistance (subsidies) and Medicaid. These benefits are often used to purchase postadoption services. An adoption assistance agreement should spell out the types of postadoption services that will be reimbursed (such as respite care or counseling). To find out about postadoption services that are paid for by adoption assistance programs in a particular State, parents can access Information Gateway's webpage on Adoption Assistance by State at www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance.

If adoption assistance programs are not available, parents can check with their health insurance company or health maintenance organization regarding mental health benefits that may be applicable.

Some States may have additional funding to support families in attending seminars, conferences, and other educational events, or for other postadoption services. Parents can contact their State postadoption specialist for information on State postadoption funding, programs, and services that may be available.

Conclusion

Seeking out postadoption services is a common way for adoptive parents to find information or someone to talk to; for adoptive families who need more intensive or specialized services, there are places for them to turn. Such activities have become normal and expected for adoptive families. Clearly, there is nothing wrong (and everything right!) with a family that seeks postadoption support at any time throughout the lifelong process of adoption.

Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway (www.childwelfare.gov) offers resources for adoptive families, including the following:

- National Adoption Directory, a database of public and private agencies, State postadoption specialists, and adoptive parent groups—www.childwelfare.gov/nad
- Database of upcoming conferences—www.childwelfare.gov/calendar/index.cfm
- The Adoption Assistance database, with information about postadoption services and funding provided by or through State agencies—www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance

- Listing of national organizations providing support to adoptive family members—
www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?svcID=135&rate_chno=AR-0011A
- *Selecting and Working With an Adoption Therapist* factsheet—
www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm

The North American Council on Adoptable Children (www.nacac.org) provides resources for transracial families, a database of parent groups, and information on starting an adoptive parent support group.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org) offers a listing of pediatricians who specialize in adoption and foster care medicine, including international adoption clinics.

ARCH National Respite Network (www.archrespite.org) provides information about respite care and a searchable database of respite care providers.

National Adoption Magazines

- *Adoptive Families*
www.adoptivefamilies.com
- *Adoption Today*
www.adoptinfo.net
- *Rainbow Kids*
www.rainbowkids.com/index.shtml
- *Fostering Families Today*
www.fosteringfamielstoday.com

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